

# NEW FRONTIERS

• PERIODICAL STUDIES IN ECONOMICS AND POLITICS •

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## The Office Worker – Labor's Side of the Ledger

By

ORLIE PELL

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# NEW FRONTIERS

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Of New Frontiers, published ten monthly issues at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1936, plus one book. State of New York, County of New York. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Robert O. Menaker, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of the New Frontiers, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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## *THE OFFICE WORKER— LABOR'S SIDE OF THE LEDGER*

*By ORLIE PELL*



## *BOOK REVIEWS*

25 CENTS PER COPY • SUBSCRIPTION \$2.50 PER YEAR

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## THE OFFICE WORKER — LABOR'S SIDE OF THE LEDGER

### INTRODUCING THE OFFICE WORKER

IN the Great American Office, it has been said, "the male is the name on the door, the hat on the coat rack, and the smoke in the corner room. But the male is not the office. The office is the competent woman at the other end of his buzzer, the two young ladies chanting his name monotonously into the mouthpiece of a kind of gutta-percha halter, the four girls in the glass coop pecking out his initials with pink fingernails on the keyboards of four voluble machines, the half dozen assorted skirts whisking through the filing cases of his correspondence."<sup>1</sup>

This contrast may symbolize for us the importance of office work, and of office workers, today. Stenographers, filing clerks, weighing clerks, checking clerks, typists, steno-typists, comptometer operators—the list is a long one. There are now about 1,850,000 men and 1,970,000 women in clerical work, a total of almost *four million*. We have only to compare this 4 million with the 203,000 in clerical occupations in 1870, and today's 775,140 women stenographers with the 7 women "shorthand writers" of sixty-five years ago, to see the growing significance of this group of workers.<sup>2</sup>

This occupational group, which has already absorbed over two million women and girls and nearly two million men, makes up a large portion of what is called the "new" middle class—the salaried employee, in contrast to the "old" middle class of small independent business men. They are, perhaps, the most typical of the "white collar" workers.

This outward and visible sign is the symbol for many other tokens of respectability,—clothes that contrast with the overalls and dungarees of the manual workers and, in the case of the women, include silk stockings and "style", education that includes at the very least a good command of the English language, and an attitude towards life that is best characterized by the very phrase, "middle-class."

These are the appearances; what are the realities behind them? We know that the patterns of our economic and social life have been



changing rapidly. To what extent are these changes undermining the foundations on which the habits and attitudes of clerical workers have been built? Is the clerical worker becoming aware of what is happening to him, or are his ways of thinking and feeling hopelessly out of date?

Let us look first at some of the facts that the inquiring office worker will find in regard to himself and his job.

#### WHAT ABOUT SALARIES?

IT has been generally taken for granted that office work guaranteed higher pay and a higher standard of living than work in shop or factory. Is this true? Let us look at the salaries of office workers during the years of America's so-called prosperity.

In 1926, a study of clerical salaries was made by the National Industrial Conference Board, covering 18 cities, 427 establishments and a total of 27,376 office employees.<sup>1</sup> The salaries were found to vary, of course, with the type of work. The median salary (the salary that falls in the middle, with just as many salaries above it as below it) was \$800 a year for mail clerks, not quite \$2600 for chief clerks, with the others in between. Of the twenty clerical occupations listed, only the three which were smallest in numbers received a salary of over \$1682 a year, or \$32 a week, while ten of the occupations, including general clerks, experienced typists, and machine operators, received \$1138 (\$21 a week) or below. Taking the six occupations it considers "characteristic of office employment comprising routine work performed under supervision", the Conference Board draws the following conclusion: "In these combined occupations the approximate average salary would appear to be close to \$25 per week (\$1260 yearly). This is slightly less than the average weekly earnings of manual workers in twenty-five industries which in the first quarter of 1926 was given by the Conference Board as \$27.27."<sup>2</sup>

Salaries for similar work in smaller cities and towns would, if anything, be less than those from large cities. We are probably safe then, in saying that in one of the best years of prosperity, clerical workers, who number almost a third of the white collar employees in the United States, received an average salary lower than the average wage of the worker in industry.



In 1932, during the worst days of the depression, a study was made by the United States Department of Labor.<sup>5</sup> Of 42,897 women office workers in 314 establishments throughout 7 cities, the median salary for all types of occupation was found to be \$99 a month. The range in salary was from \$55 to \$165, and included the following median salaries:

	<i>Monthly Salary</i>
Secretary .....	\$156
Stenographer .....	114
Bookkeeper .....	111
Dictating-machine transcriber .....	103
Machine operator .....	98
Typist .....	93
File clerk .....	81

Over half the women employed in mail order houses were getting less than \$75 a month. The weekly salaries ranged from \$20 to \$39.

In 1933 this type of advertisement was to be found in the New York City newspaper:

WANTED: Stenographer-Bookkeeper: This position in small office requires capability, experience and industry, easily worth \$30 a week and more. Now offering \$12-15 week. No beginners.<sup>6</sup>

During the winter of 1935, ads like these appeared daily in the New York *Times* and the *Herald-Tribune*:

#### HELP WANTED

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CHIEF CLERK: exec. ability, to supervise 15 to 20 girls. RTW Chain Stores.	\$18-\$17
LEGAL STENO-SECY., experienced, young, attractive personality .....	\$15
BURROUGHS bookkeeping mach., bank .....	\$18
COST CLERK, posting experience .....	\$18
STENOGRAPHER, foreclosure work .....	\$15
STENOGRAPHERS, law .....	\$12-\$15-\$18

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STENO., biller, model 16, mfg. sportwear, res. Brooklyn .....	\$15
STENO., sales ability .....	\$18
STENO., finance detail expr. ....	\$15
LEGAL STENO., attractive .....	\$12
UNDERWOOD bookkeeper, \$18; stenographer, legal, \$15; hat model-steno., \$15 bookkeeper, \$18.	
BOOKKEEPER, Stenog. and Typist .....	\$15
STENO-BILLING CLERK, familiar Burroughs Calculator, exp. only. Salary	\$15
BKPR., model (3), size 14 or 16, must be highly recommended .....	\$18, \$15
Showroom, sales-steno, 22 hat size .....	\$15

It is a recognized fact, accepted alike by workers and employers, that one reason for low wages in office work—perhaps the chief reason—is the large number of women employed. It has been assumed that women do not need to be self-supporting. If young and unmarried, as the majority of women office workers are, they often live in their parents' home; if married, they have their husbands to depend on. It can be shown that this easy assumption is incorrect, that an increasingly large number of women clerical workers do depend for support entirely upon their own earnings<sup>8</sup> and, in addition, a surprising number of women take responsibility for dependent relatives—parents, younger brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. Nevertheless the assumption went for a long time unchallenged, and dragged down the salaries not only of women office workers but of the men with whom they compete for jobs.

We must remember, of course, that the salary of a white collar worker must not only keep him or her alive, but must pay for the "upkeep" that the nature of the job requires. "Good appearance and smart clothes"; for the man, this means business suits and a white collar; for the woman, it means a great deal more—dresses and coats and hats in style, silk stockings and good looking shoes, gloves and accessories, cosmetics, well-groomed hair and finger nails. These are not to be had for nothing. A study made in 1935<sup>9</sup> showed that the typical budget for a girl in office work earning \$25 a week included



\$240 a year for clothes, of which an important item was the 50 pairs of stockings a year! The yearly clothes bill for one \$25-a-week girl ran as follows: 4 hats at \$3.50 each; 5 pairs of shoes at \$5; 8 dresses, from \$6 to \$10; a winter coat for \$40 (lasts three seasons); a sport coat for \$25; stockings, a pair a week at 69¢; other clothing for \$75. Cosmetics came to \$10. A \$20-a-week girl bought annually only two winter and two summer dresses at \$5 to \$15; two pairs of shoes at \$7.50; miscellaneous items at \$40, and a coat every four years at \$25. But she buys a pair of 69¢ stockings every week.<sup>10</sup>

These items are not a sign of vanity or frivolity on the part of the women. They are essential in getting and holding a job in competition with hundreds of others. Yet an employer can offer \$8 weekly for an expert typist with a knowledge of German; another can cut the salary of his secretary, a college graduate, to \$6!<sup>11</sup> With salaries as low as these, it is not surprising that clerical workers are among those women who have jobs and yet must apply to public relief agencies for help. Of 6,674 employed women on relief in New York City, 8 per cent were found to be clerical workers.<sup>12</sup>

So much for the high salaries and high living standards provided by the job in an office!

#### IS THE OFFICE WORKER SECURE IN HIS JOB?

ONE of the advantages of clerical work as contrasted with industrial, has been its greater permanence and security. With very little seasonal fluctuation in this field, and very little hiring by the day, most office jobs could be assumed to be reasonably permanent. But economic conditions are changing this. Even more than depressions in the past, this one has spread to all occupations and all classes. Clerical workers are necessary in large numbers during periods of economic expansion, but, when business declines, they are thrown off relentlessly. Moreover, as industry grows but at the same time becomes more and more concentrated, the overhead expenses of administration and clerical work constitute a larger proportion of the cost, until they have become "Mass production's Pain in the Neck."<sup>13</sup> When the limits of expansion are reached, or when depression sets in, these men and women in office jobs may expect the worst.



Let us see what the economic crisis has done to office jobs. In the Spring of 1933, the percentage of salaried workers out of a job reached almost 35 per cent, which is not so far below the 45 per cent for all workers taken together. From 1929 to 1933, in manufacturing industries alone, employment dropped 41 per cent among salaried employees (mainly clerical) and only 31 per cent for wage workers.<sup>14</sup> In the same year in Philadelphia, there were estimated to be 10 office jobs for every 100 applicants.<sup>15</sup> A report of the New York State Employment Service for 1934 states that, although one out of three women applying for work was a white collar worker, only one out of eight of those given employment were placed in white collar jobs.

We have only to look at the relief rolls to see the results. In New York City in 1934, 40 per cent of those seeking work relief were white collar workers.<sup>16</sup> For the country as a whole, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration reported that in April, 1935, 752,000, or 12 per cent of the total number of workers on relief were white collar workers, of which a large number were office workers and salespeople. In 1936, 10 per cent of the persons on relief were found to be clerical workers, in addition to another 10 per cent listed as professional and proprietary.<sup>17</sup>

Knowing the pride of the white collar worker, we can imagine their reluctance to admit what they consider defeat as individuals by applying for relief. We are safe in assuming that the total number of men and women office workers who walk the streets searching for jobs is far greater than the relief figures indicate. These men and women see their precious dollars slipping away, week after week, as they strive to keep up appearances—suits *must* be kept pressed, and stockings kept without runs. As the months go by, they feel themselves becoming rusty, their hard-earned skills dropping from them. They experience, as do skilled workers in any field, the sense of frustration that comes to human beings when they are prevented from exercising the capacities they have within them. Because they have been brought up to believe that success depends entirely upon the individual, that, in America, there is opportunity for any man or woman who has enough ability, they blame themselves for their plight, and their sense of failure is all the more intense.



## ENTER THE MACHINE

WHILE the skills of the unemployed are becoming rusty, in many cases those of the employed are becoming obsolete. For the machine is invading the office, as it has invaded the factory. It has been estimated that 80 per cent of office jobs are such as can, to some extent, be mechanized, and among large offices the process is taking place rapidly.<sup>18</sup> These machines include among others the comptometer, the addressograph, the billing machine, the calculator, the tabulator, the duplicator, multigraph, mimeograph and photostat. As the very names suggest, there has come with the machine a greater division of labor and greater specialization of jobs. While the general clerk and the stenographer who performs a dozen or more necessary jobs around the office still remain, specialization has entered the offices where a large number of clerical workers are employed. As an illustration of this we have the description of the handling of orders in one large firm:

"Orders are passed along by means of a belt and lights, from a chief clerk to a series of checkers and typists, each of whom does one operation. The girl at the head of the line interprets the order, puts down the number and indicates the trade discount; the second girl prices the order, takes off the discount, adds the carriage charge and totals; the third girl gives the order a number and makes a daily record; the fourth girl puts this information on the alphabetical index; the fifth girl time-stamps it; it next goes along the belt to one of several typists, who makes a copy in septuplet and puts on address labels; the seventh girls checks it and sends it to the storeroom."<sup>19</sup>

What are some of the effects of the coming of the machine into the office? The introduction of labor-saving machinery into the factory has in the past thrown workers out of jobs, at least temporarily. Though the machinery might bring an increase in production and might later provide jobs for those workers, or for workers coming after them, the immediate effect was loss of the job for the man or woman whom the machine replaced. Has the same been true of the office machine? It is not easy to say. It is certain that at the time office machinery was being introduced extensively, the number of office workers was increasing. But there are many factors to account for this increase. And it is possible that the growth in number of workers might have been even greater had not replacement by machinery been taking place during this period.<sup>20</sup> In many cases the machine introduced a line of work new to that particular office, some-



times actually increasing the office force. For example, duplicating machines make possible the wholesale production of form letters where it was not attempted before, or where letters were previously sent out of the office to be done."

In the latter case the office machine competes with workers outside the office, not within it. An "office robot under the guise of an addressing machine which, being fed a roll of paper, prints, scores, addresses, and stacks bills at a rate of 3,000 an hour" cuts down costs, but the labor company, according to the Women's Bureau, "was not one of reduction of the number of employed, but of a reduced printing bill—a bit of disastrous competition for the printer rather than the clerical worker." 22

#### WHAT DOES THE OFFICE MACHINE DO TO SALARIES?

ONE clear effect of the more mechanized and more routine job is a decrease in pay. More specialization is possible in larger offices, such as mail order houses, the larger publishing houses and insurance companies, and here we find a lower salary average than in smaller firms, such as investment houses." The effect of the machine on salaries is still more clearly seen in the difference between what is paid to machine operators and what is paid to those who perform the same operation by hand. Where hand bookkeepers, for example, were found to receive a median salary of \$110 a month, machine bookkeepers received a median of \$104 a month. Stenographers, who take dictation, received a median of \$114, dictating machine transcribers, \$103." This is perhaps typical of machine work of all kinds. A recent study of the effect of machines on women's jobs shows that mechanization tends to level wages, decreasing the higher wages, slightly increasing the lower. The great majority of those receiving originally more than \$20 a week found their wages decreased; a little more than half of those receiving less than \$16 a week found their wages increased. Altogether, the wages of about one half of the workers went down, one third went up, the others staying the same." This does not offer much hope to office workers. As they see the machine pushing farther into their own domain, they may increasingly find themselves in the blind alley of a routine, low paid job.



The machine in some cases brings also a change in the form of payment. The use of machinery in place of hand work makes possible in many cases the more accurate measuring of results accomplished. The amount of work done in a given time—the number of strokes made on the machine—can be recorded exactly, and payment made on this basis. So we see in some types of office work the beginning of “piece rates”, and the bonus system. In the case of piece work, no basic weekly or monthly wage is guaranteed; the worker is paid for whatever amount of work is actually recorded in a given time. Under the bonus system, the worker will be paid a basic wage, and be paid extra for what he produces in addition to the minimum. For example, 240 strokes on a certain machine may be considered equivalent to one point, and 600 points taken as the minimum. The worker will receive a basic wage and be expected to produce the 600 points each week; in addition he will receive one and a half cents for each point, or 240 strokes, above that.” While exceptionally fast workers are able with these methods of payment to earn more than the average worker, the methods have obvious disadvantages. There is the drive for greater and greater speed, which is not any less hard on the nerves and health of the office worker because he himself is doing the driving. His own ambition, or his consciousness of his economic needs, wields the whip. But the hopes of increase in pay may in the end be thwarted. For it may be true in offices, as it has been in industry, that greater production, instead of leading to higher earnings leads only to an increase in the base production, with more output required for the same wage. Again, the blind alley.

#### THE OFFICE WORKER BECOMES A “Cog”

WORK which is specialized and standardized, as machine work is, involves greater tension and greater monotony. To perform on a machine is to repeat over and over again a limited number of movements. This task, once learned, takes little initiative, little judgment. Although at present the great majority of clerical workers using machines operate more than one kind of machine in the course of their work, and combine machine operation with other types of activity.” We may look for the continued success of the machine to lead towards further specialization and division of

work until the office worker finds himself going in the same direction as other workers have gone in the past: towards the continuous repetition of the simplest movement with the least thought.

It is ironic, to say the least, that this tendency in the character of office work comes at the time when the educational background of office workers is steadily increasing! An increase in education, both formal and informal, is characteristic of the population as a whole, but is perhaps especially so of clerical workers, whose ranks are today being filled by college graduates who are unable to find work in the fields for which they trained, and by those who might ordinarily have stopped at the end of grammar school but who have gone on because of the difficulty of finding jobs during depression years. As their capacities increase, individuals are to be cheated out of the opportunity to use them.

Another factor, and one which may prove to be the most far-reaching of all, is the de-personalization of clerical jobs that results from new forms of office organization. In the large companies, employing hundreds of workers, the clerk is no longer the "chief's" right-hand man. He will probably never lay eyes on his employer. He will spend his time day after day in a large room with a hundred or more other workers doing the same or similar tasks. His immediate boss will be a salaried office manager. His ultimate employer will be the stockholders of the corporation. When the stenographer takes dictation it may be not from a man who has her as his stenographer, but from whichever of the many executives happens to want a letter taken at that moment. Or it may even be from a mere voice issuing from the cylinder of a dictaphone!

This change more than any other reaches to the heart of the office worker's sense of pride. To be close to the "big" men, to have contact with important people to be on the "inside,"—these were some of the factors that, for many a humble clerk, took the place of a high salary and raised him in his own and his friends' eyes. To know as much about the business as the boss himself, to be confided in and given responsibility, gave to the man or woman in the office a satisfaction denied to the worker in the shop. This difference between office and manual worker was often emphasized by the employer as a means of binding the clerical force more closely to the management through building up a sense of identification. The private secretary, of course, still exists,



as does the "girl in the office" who knows all about the inner workings of the business and on whom responsibility for the details still falls. But the important fact is that today, in addition to these, we are witnessing the constant increase of the other type of clerical worker, whose job has become more mechanized, more specialized, more monotonous, who is one of many in the same office plugging away at tasks that can have little meaning and little satisfaction.

#### SHALL THE OFFICE WORKER STAND ALONE?

LOOKING upon all of the changes that are seeping into the working lives of the millions of men and women who have so hopefully trained themselves for clerical occupations, one striking fact stands out. The importance of the individual worker is becoming less and less. The office worker is becoming, as the industrial work has become, one small cog in a very big machine, and a machine in which he has no control. He may imagine that his salary is decided upon by agreement between himself and his employer; in reality, it is determined by economic forces beyond the control of either. The insecurity from which he hoped a salaried position would free him is found to increase as competition for white collar jobs grows, and is intensified by the economic depression. The invasion of the machine only accelerates these trends and, in addition, takes from the work much of its earlier opportunity for individual initiative and responsibility. The individual office worker can no longer fight his battles alone. With a decrease in self-sufficiency, the way is opened for a new feeling of solidarity with others. How long will it be before he is driven by the "logic of events" to seek the alliance of his fellow-workers?

Office workers have seldom thought of themselves as workers or concerned themselves with the labor movement. One reason has of course been their middle-class attitude. What, thinks the stenographer at her desk or the accountant among his ledgers, has "labor" to do with a salaried position like mine? Another reason for the office worker's aloofness from labor has been the large number of women. Women workers have traditionally thought of their work as an interlude between school and marriage and have had less interest

than have had men in banding together with their co-workers to improve the conditions of their jobs.

But times are changing, and this attitude is becoming less true. In the first place, while younger women are more desired by employers and find it easier to secure a position when they apply, yet the number of older women who remain in office work is probably increasing.<sup>2</sup> The self-supporting women who do not marry, naturally stay on in the work, and an increasingly large number of women who do marry find it necessary to contribute to the support of their home. It is true that the depression has brought with it a tendency for employers to turn off married women first of all and to give preference to the unmarried; but, in spite of this, the number of married women on the job increases, perhaps due to a growing custom of keeping marriage a secret.

A publication of the U. S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Gainful Employment of Married Women*, shows that the percentage of women clerical workers who are married has doubled between 1920 and 1930, going from 9.1% to 18.3% (p. 5). Bulletin of the Women's Bureau No. 120 reports (p. 13) that of the 42,000 women studied, 11.8% were married, but goes on to say: "The below-average proportion reported as married may be due partly to failure to notify employers of a change in marital status in firms where there are restrictions against the retention of married women. Also many of the offices included in the study are large, and generally these had the most definite and drastic policies barring married women."

The tendency towards greater permanency of women in office work will be likely to have an effect upon their attitude towards their jobs. They will care more about the conditions of the work in which they will spend a large part of their lives. The office will no longer be a stop-gap, but their normal working life, and will be worth their effort to make it a better one. This, combined with a growing awareness of how insignificant the individual is in modern industry, will go far in creating in women office workers an interest in unionization as a means of improving work conditions. Since women now constitute over one half of the total number of clerical workers, a change in their attitude cannot but affect the position of the whole group.

What of the relation of clerical workers to workers in other fields, workers who wear overalls instead of the white collar? Is the salary check at the end of the week superior to the pay envelope if the pay envelope contains as much or more? Is pounding the pavements in search of a job any easier for the high-heeled stenographer than for



the factory hand? Is one machine so different from another; and one "cog" different from another "cog?" There is evidence that office work and manual work are to some extent interchangeable and that workers shift from one to the other as jobs occur" in proportion as the work in the large, highly mechanized office becomes indistinguishable from the work done in any other large plant, office workers will come to recognize their similarity to these other workers. They will begin to see that all who earn their living by selling their labor face the same ultimate problems, whether that labor be of hand or brain or both.

#### OFFICE WORKERS AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

IT MAY seem like a paradox that while the individual in the office is becoming more insignificant, the functions performed by the office staff is becoming more and more essential a modern business. As efficiency in production increases, the strain of the administrative end and the distributing end become greater. Selling, advertising, publicity, financing, the keeping of records, the compiling of data, the mechanics of inter-office correspondence—these functions expand with the growth and concentration of business enterprise. How long could a corporation today carry on its work if its typewriter, and its switchboard, stood idle? The files, the accounts, the records, the mailing lists—these are the life blood of the business office today.

This dependence of business on its office staff gives to clerical workers a potential power, but again a power of which they are hardly conscious. For changes come about slowly, and old attitudes die hard. The mass of office workers are still tragically unaware of the implications of the new developments in their working lives and blind to the new tool that lies in their hands if they could but learn to use it. The power of acting as a group, of using their collective strength to improve their own conditions, is an unfamiliar one to them. They will come to it only as they outgrow their old accustomed attitude of individual self-sufficiency. But there are signs that such a change in attitude has already taken root, that an awakening among office workers is well under way.

We may point to renewed life among office workers' unions. For example, the number of such unions affiliated as federal locals with

the American Federation of Labor has increased since 1934 from 33 to 40, and there is a continued demand for a national clerical union. The largest of these locals, the Bookkeepers, Stenographers and Accountants Union in New York City, increased its membership during this time from 700 to 2,500. Although its members originally came from the offices of trade unions and organizations sympathetic to labor, 60 per cent of its present membership are employed in commercial establishments.

In addition to developing unions of their own crafts, clerical workers are joining together with other workers in the same enterprise to form unions of the "vertical" type. The most startling developments of this kind during the depression have been in the various types of government employment. In addition to the American Federation of Government Employees and the National Federation of Federal Employees,<sup>30</sup> the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees has recently been formed to give strength on a national scale to the many local and newly developed unions, e.g., those formed by workers in home relief bureaus. In all these organizations the clerical workers and the social workers, technicians, etc., are standing together.<sup>31</sup>

For a number of years the clerical staff in schools and educational institutions have been eligible for the teachers' union, and many locals of the American Federation of Teachers include clerks among their membership. One local, the Chicago Educational Secretaries Union, consists entirely of school clerks. Office workers in editorial offices have thrown in their lot with the newspaper men and women of the Guild. Those working in private welfare agencies have, as in the case of the newly formed Social Service Employees Union, joined with the social workers; in the Technical, Editorial and Office Assistants Union, the clerical workers of a consumers' research organization pooled their strength with all other types of workers in the plant, from janitor to high-salaried expert. And so the story goes.

Organized office workers are beginning to feel their strength. They carry on collective bargaining with the purpose of establishing a minimum salary of \$21 a week, a 35 to 39 hour week, time and a half pay for overtime and two weeks vacation with pay, and in some cases succeed in establishing a closed shop. In at least a dozen instances office workers either by themselves or jointly with other workers, have



conducted strikes and been found on the picket line. The offices against which clerical workers have struck include a publishing house, a magazine, a research organization, a large public utility company, newspaper offices and a news distributing agency, a bakery, a hospital, a toy manufacturer, a textile company, a mailing service, and others.

As an example, we may look at the strike conducted in the Spring of 1935 in a middle western city against a powerful electrical company. The electrical workers, after negotiations had failed, went out on strike against continued pay cuts. The office workers, who had shared in the cuts, joined the electrical workers a hundred and thirty strong, and joint picket lines were established. After eighteen hours of strike the company agreed to negotiate with both groups of workers. The results were a recinding of pay cuts, and the recognition of the office workers' union by the management. Another example of effective cooperation may be found in this brief account: "It took a picket line of six girls to shut down the entire plant of the Simmons Manufacturing Company here. When the workers, members of the machinists' union, saw the picket line of the Office Workers' Union they turned around and walked home again."

Among both organized and unorganized office workers there is a growing interest in the labor movement and its relation to their own jobs. Every year since 1933 from thirty to forty office workers have come from all parts of the country to spend their summer vacation at a labor school established especially for clerical workers." At this school stenographers, machine operators, file clerks, bookkeepers, analyze their own economic problems and see them in relation to the whole industrial structure. They study and discuss methods of cooperating with their co-workers and with workers in other fields. In the summer of 1936 a two-day conference was held at the school on "The Place of the White Collar Worker in the Labor Movement." The conference, the first of its kind in the United States, was attended by industrial, clerical and professional workers who discussed together their common problems within the labor movement. From the school almost a hundred and fifty students have gone out to be active in their existing unions or in the formation of new unions, and in workers' clubs, minority parties and other labor groups.

In the spring of 1934 an assembly of representatives of business girls' clubs" having a membership of 250,000, voted as one of the

objectives for their organizations during the next two years, "to find their relation to the labor movement." This was interpreted to mean, in addition to the study of unionism and what it stands for, the giving of support to groups experimenting with union organization. In the action of this nation-wide organization we have evidence of the spread of what is at least a sympathetic interest in trade unionism for clerical workers.

### WHITHER?

OFFICE workers today, like all white collar workers, present a challenge. A small but growing minority are aware of the changes affecting their economic life and are striving to understand and to meet the new problems. The large majority are still wholly or largely unawakened. For many years those who work in the office have felt themselves to be close to the management and have identified themselves with the employer. They have thought in terms of the old economic order—individual initiative, business and profits, private property, the status quo. It is within this system that office workers, like other workers, have sought the security they long for.

But as conditions change it is becoming clear that their security is not to be found where they have sought it. Their economic interest, unlike their employer's, lies not in profit and not in property, but in the security of their job. That kind of security is something they can only forge for themselves by acting together—together with fellow-members of their own crafts and with all others who depend upon their own labor for a living.

Office workers are today in the midst of "the race between education and catastrophe." They must overcome the lag that lies between the swift-moving forces of the present and the attitudes of yesterday if they are to save themselves from insecurity and confusion. While they stick to the old individualism of self-sufficiency, they are ineffectual, and can play no part as a group in determining their own future. They can move forward only by gaining a new attitude and a new understanding, by finding their own place as workers in the economic system in which they live.



## F O O T N O T E S

<sup>1</sup> *Fortune Magazine*, Vol. 12, No. 2, August, 1935, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> See abstract of the Fifteenth Census (1930) of the United States, pp. 305, 320. The figures for agents, collectors and credit men have been deducted from the totals given there as Male: 2,038,494; Female: 1,986,830; Total: 4,025,324. See also U. S. Census, 1870.

<sup>3</sup> National Industrial Conference Board, *Clerical Salaries in the United States*. N. Y. 1926.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 34-35.

<sup>5</sup> U. S. Department of Labor Bulletin of the Women's Bureau No. 120, *The Employment of Women in Offices*. Washington, D.C., 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism*. Covici-Friede, New York, 1934., p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> From leaflet issued in 1935 by Bookkeepers, Stenographers and Accountants Union, A. F. of L. Local No. 12646, New York City.

<sup>8</sup> See U. S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau Bulletin No. 132, *Women Who Work in Offices*, pp. 10, 11. "Practically seven-eighths of the 4,764 women . . . were self-supporting. It is surprising that more than two-fifths of the women earning less than \$15 reported self-support."

<sup>9</sup> *Fortune Magazine*, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Corey, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> U. S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Gainful Employment of Married Women*, Aug. 1936, p. 10. Summarized from New York Industrial Bulletin, Feb. 1936, *Wages and Family Responsibilities of Employed Women on Relief in New York City*, 1935.

<sup>13</sup> See, "White Collars: Mass Production's Pain in the Neck," in *Factory and Industrial Management*, Vol. 79, Feb. 1930, pp. 290-292.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Corey, *The Crisis of the Middle Class*, Covici-Friede, New York, 1935, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Gladys Palmer, Research Department, Wharton School of Finance, in conversation.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Corey, *The Crisis of the Middle Class*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Public Affairs Pamphlet, No. 8, *This Question of Relief*. Prepared by Maxwell S. Stewart. Public Affairs Committee. 1936, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> In 1929, according to the Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 120, p. 7, nine million dollars worth of office machinery was sold. A communication in 1936 from *Office Appliances*, the technical trade journal of office equipment, states: "Practically all of the typewriter manufacturers established records in production in 1935. . . . What is true in reference to typewriters is also a fact in lesser degree in reference to calculating, tabulating, and duplicating machines. New Federal and state laws, some of them becoming operative in 1935, have caused an increase of office machine usage. The necessity of keeping more complete and accurate records has enlarged the use of efficient accounting equipment, which of course includes computing and bookkeeping machines."

<sup>19</sup> Grace Coyle, *Present Trends in Clerical Occupations*. Women's Press, 1929, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> See U. S. Department of Labor, Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 120, p. 17. "In general the increase in number of clerical workers and development

of office machines has been concomitant. Machines have decidedly tended to curb the rapid rise in number of employees with the increased office functions of modern business."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 16-17. "Before the advent of such machines, much of this form of communication was non-existent and the development of simply operated duplicating devices has encouraged the production of a good share of the circular letters and data available on all sides. Very rarely could any one recall any replacement of clerks because of their installation; instead clerks were added or the time saved in some other way was utilized in operating these machines." Of the tabulating machine, the *Bulletin* says: "In some cases these machines had been brought in to do an entirely new line of work, so no one was replaced but instead the force was slightly augmented."

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*. p. 16. See also p. 17, "Automatic typewriters as installed in the offices tended more to compete with commercial letter bureaus than to reduce the personnel of a particular office."

<sup>23</sup> Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 120, pp. 3, 4. "Factors of size of office and policies of management have a direct bearing on salary schedules. In smaller offices specialization and division of work are not so great and the proportion of secretaries and stenographers are relatively high, with fewer routine clerks, which condition tends to raise the median."

<sup>24</sup> Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 120, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 107, *Technological Changes in Relation to Women's Employment*, 1935, pp. 14, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Grace Coyle, *Present Trends in Clerical Occupations*, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 132, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Joel Berrall, *The White Collar Class Joins the Labor Movement* in Table V, p. 16, shows that in 1890, 31 per cent of women office workers were over 25; by 1920 this proportion had risen 40 per cent.

<sup>29</sup> See Joel Berrall, *The White Collar Class Joins the Labor Movement*. In a foot-note on p. 12 the author reports the following: "E. C. Werner of the University of Pennsylvania, delving in 'The Employment History of Unskilled Male Office Workers of Continuation School Age in Philadelphia for Five Years After Graduation,' found that at the end of the period (1924-29), 101 of the 305 boys studied (one-third) had shifted into manual jobs (helpers in factories, 'printers apprentices,' etc.) Also of those who became 'helpers in factories,' 5 per cent shifted back into office work. This shifting back and forth is one of the most direct evidences of 'the proletarianization' of clerks we have found."

<sup>30</sup> The membership of the American Federation of Government Employees in 1936 (prior to the formation of the A.F.S.C. and M.E.) was given by the Inter-professional Association as about 32,000; the membership of the National Federation of Federal Employees as about 60,000.

<sup>31</sup> The national office of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees gave their membership in December, 1936, as approximately 12,000; and estimated that three or four hundred of their members outside of New York City were clerical workers. One of their New York City locals numbered their union membership at about 6,500, of which they estimated approximately one-third were clerical.

<sup>32</sup> *Socialist Call*, Oct. 24, 1936.

<sup>33</sup> The Summer School for Office Workers, sponsored by the Affiliated Schools for Workers, 302 East 35th Street, New York City.

<sup>34</sup> The Business and Professional Assembly of the Y.W.C.A.



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*The White Collar Class Joins the Labor Movement* by Joel Berrall—Columbia University Library. 1933.

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*Professional Workers Unionize* by A. Hartwell and C. Whitney—New Republic, Feb. 19, 1936, pp. 41-43.

A factual account of unions among professional workers, from the formation of the American Federation of Musicians in 1896 to the rapid increase in organization among white collar and professional W.P.A. workers today.

*Challenge to the Middle Class* by Mary Van Kleeck, Lewis Corey, Francis Gorman, Granville Hicks and others—Quarterly issue, New Masses, April 7, 1936. 15 cents.

An issue devoted entirely to the place of middle class and white collar workers today and their role in the coming struggle for power.



## BOOK REVIEWS

*Man's Worldly Goods.* Leo Huberman. New York. Harper, 1936.  
349 pages. \$2.50.

In contrast with W. E. Woodward's *A New American History*, Mr. Huberman's volume consistently, in page after page, in chapter after chapter, brings home to the reader how powerfully the method of production and exchange of a given generation determines the politics and the cultural life of the community in that generation and in succeeding eras.

Mr. Huberman begins his book with the Middle Ages, and analyzes the position of the Church, the nobility and the serf in the economy of those days. He traces the development of industry to the capitalist form, and shows how small scale production steadily grew into the trust and combine stage of today.

The author describes in a remarkably clear and simple fashion the essential principles of Adam Smith, of David Ricardo, of Karl Marx and other leading economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and shows how the philosophy of each of these masters grew out of their social and economic environment.

He is a staunch defender of the economic interpretation of history first comprehensively formulated by Karl Marx and sees history evolving in general in the direction prophesied by Marx and Engels. The value of the book would have been increased if the author had told something about the changes that took place in the tactics advocated by Marx and Engels from the issuance of the *Communist Manifesto* in the late forties to their deaths in the latter part of the century. While Mr. Huberman sets forth some of the arguments of those who claim that a change from capitalism to Socialism cannot take place without an intervening civil war, he neglects to state the case of those believing in the possibility of democratic progress from one system to another. The book is splendidly illustrated and contains an excellent bibliography.

—H. W. L.

*Ebb and Flow of Trade Unionism.* Leo Wolman. New York, National Bureau of Economic Research. 1936. 251 pages. \$2.50.

Dr. Wolman's volume presents the latest and most detailed analysis of the recent growth and present status of trade unionism in the



United States. It gives excellent descriptions of trade union growth before and during the world war; in the days of our new capitalism, and during and following the existence of the N.R.A. The book brings the reader up to the present struggle between the C.I.O. and the A. F. of L.

Dr. Wolman indicates that the trade union movement, while growing in numbers from 1910 to 1930, was relatively no stronger in the latter than the former year. In 1910, the author declares, 8.6 per cent of the employees of the country were organized in trade unions; in 1920, immediately after the war, 17.5 per cent, and in 1930, 9.3 per cent. If only non-agricultural workers are considered, the percentages respectively would be 9.9 per cent, 19.4 per cent and 10.2 per cent.

During the N.R.A., the movement increased by over a half million, the largest increase being witnessed in the needle trades and in the mining and shoe industries. The International Ladies Garment Workers' Union outdistanced all other unions in its growth during the period of the N.R.A.

The study indicates the extreme difficulty of obtaining accurate figures on the strength of the trade unions from year to year. The ups and downs of various union organizations during the last quarter of a century gives one pause in making predictions regarding their future program. The fact that only one out of every 8 to 10 employees is now organized in trade unions proves the great need for waging a powerful and militant campaign of organization along industrial lines if the wage-earners of the country are to be rescued from the feudalistic conditions prevailing in many of our mass industries.

H. W. L.